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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SERBIA: AVOIDING CARGO CULT

Summary

¶1. The United States' objective in Southern Serbia is to integrate the Albanian-majority Presevo Valley with the rest of the country. While the region is currently stable, its relationship with Belgrade is dysfunctional and local Albanian leaders have failed to commit to a future with Serbia. Local contacts told the DCM during an October 25-26 visit to the region that U.S. involvement was critical to keep Belgrade and Albanian leaders working together to achieve what both sides claimed they want -- a prosperous, stable future in the EU. Post will work to prevent a "cargo cult mentality" and will ensure that local citizens understand that international assistance did not simply fall out of the sky after violence broke out; rather it is tied to their future within Serbia. End Summary.

Serbs, Albanians Talk About the Future

¶2. Southern Serbia is still a success story for the GOS. In 2001, Belgrade successfully diffused an armed insurgency in Southern Serbia's Presevo Valley through mediation and agreed to integrate local Albanians into government institutions. Today, the affected municipalities have held three local elections, avoided ethnic violence, and have elected an ethnic-Albanian Member of Parliament. The GOS's Coordinating Body for Southern Serbia (CB) still functions and is in contact with Albanian leaders. Local leaders (both Serb and Albanian) and GOS officials all confirmed to the DCM that they desired stability, security and a future in the EU. Rather than the palpable hate and rhetoric that plagued this region in the past, the local mayors, police officials and GOS representatives discussed issues in terms of future. The U.S. remains a significant and respected player, with heavy press coverage documenting every stop during the visit.

Southern Serbia or Eastern Kosovo?

¶3. Albanian leaders in Southern Serbia would not commit to a future in Serbia and used Kosovo as an excuse for ambiguity. At worst, this leaves secession on the table and, at best, is a major irritant to the GOS. In separate October 26 meetings with the DCM, Presevo Mayor Ragmi Mustafa and Bujanovac Mayor Nagip Arifi both blamed unfulfilled promises by Belgrade as a basis for their ambiguity over the future status of the Presevo Valley. Riza Halimi, Member of Parliament and leader of the largest Albanian party in Serbia, blamed hard-line Albanians for dividing the community and being unable to make a joint statement on being part of Serbia. His coalition partner, Skender Destani, said Albanians would adhere to "whatever state the Presevo Valley was determined to be in." While the Presevo Valley Albanians have legitimate complaints about the CB, they also use unfulfilled promises for political leverage with the international community. Arifi, Mustafa and other leaders used

meetings with the DCM to cite incomplete CB projects such as a maternity ward in Presevo and teacher's college in Bujanovac, as proof that Belgrade had forgotten about Southern Serbia. They also continued to complain about the heavy-handed presence of the Serbian Gendarmerie forces and their occupation of various formerly community-oriented structures.

¶4. The Albanian leaders' vacillation irks Belgrade, and both sides distrust each other. In an October 24 interview with Nedeljni Telegraf, a CB vice-president accused Presevo Valley Albanians of "hypocrisy" and "going to Belgrade for money and to Pristina for advice." Director of the CB, Nenad Djurdjevic, told the DCM on October 25 that the Presevo Valley continued to receive disproportionate attention and resources from Belgrade but that the Albanians "could not even make a common statement" to live in Serbia.

¶5. Meanwhile, the Serbs in the region have abandoned the weak and unorganized "Coalition for Bujanovac" for the visible and inflammatory Serbian Radical Party (their "Stop the Seselj Trial" posters have turned Bujanovac into an anti-minority gauntlet). "Coalition of Bujanovac" leader Stojanca Arsic told the DCM on October 26 that he would not talk with the Radicals but did not offer a competing vision. When asked, he defined Radical adherents as hayseeds from the hills and appeared unwilling or unable to penetrate their circles. In short, Arsic and other moderates have conceded Bujanovac to the Radicals and yet the Radicals remain completely marginalized from any significant political process. Mayor Arifi described Radical participation in municipality meetings as meaningless. "They oppose whatever we want to do and walk out."

¶6. As in the rest of Serbia, the Orthodox Church is very influential. Unfortunately, the Vranje Eparchy will not be a constructive factor while led by the bigoted Bishop Pahomije. On October 26, Pahomije spouted messages of fear and hate, and claimed

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that Serbia would be cleansed of Serbs by "Turks, Albanians and Muslim Gypsies," who had "come over the hills" after World War II and tried to convert the region to Islam. Pahomije said that the Serbs had "held the line" against Islam on behalf of "Christian Europe." Pahomije said Iran was busy building a green corridor through the Balkans up to Vienna and was enlisting the Albanians in this cause. "We can help teach you how to fight Islam," Pahomije offered, "otherwise your Black Friday will come." (Pahomije is a controversial figure due to widely-publicized pedophilia allegations of which he was cleared in 2006 following heavy Church involvement with the case. His mental acuity is questionable; he proposed to the DCM a U.S. Democracy Commission grant for medical research on a breed of cattle living on church lands whose genetic material he thinks could cure AIDS.) Nevertheless, post will engage with local church leaders to keep open important lines of communication with the Serb community and to explore avenues for faith-based initiatives.

Security

¶7. The security situation remains an irritant in Belgrade's relationship with local Albanian leaders. Shaip Kamberi, director of the Bujanovac Council for Human Rights, complained to the DCM on October 25, of the militarization and Interior Ministry's Gendarmerie presence in the Presevo Valley. In an email to the DCM on October 29, he appealed for "international assistance," in the case of the beating of an ethnic Albanian, which was typical of local groups' focus on individual cases versus developing a vision for the future.

¶8. The GOS, however, contends that the security presence is justified and reasonable. In stark contradiction to Bishop Pahomije's complaints and "photographic evidence" of Albanian desecration of Orthodox religious objects (churches and cemeteries), Vranje Police Chief Stole Filipovic told the DCM on October 26 that the security situation in the region was "under control" with the police using the "least amount of required presence." He claimed

that out of the hundreds of Orthodox and Muslim religious objects in his jurisdiction (all of Southern Serbia) none had been damaged, though there had been some petty theft. He said that Albanians were adequately represented in the police force, but fudged the numbers, using the Albanians' national percentage (around 1%) rather than the district or municipal percentages, which were considerably higher. In the short-term, it was unrealistic to expect the GOS to draw down forces with Kosovo unresolved, he said. The GOS could, however, be much more transparent in its operations and consult more closely with local Albanian authorities.

Serbia's (Lacking) Economic Plan

¶9. Belgrade's economic plan for Southern Serbia is not clear. Djurdjevic told the DCM on October 25 that the CB will continue for another year. The CB's Economic Team for Southern Serbia, still led by Nenad Popovic, has disappeared and various contacts noted their concern that the Ministry of Economy and Regional Development might take over GOS investment. Local USAID implementers expressed concern that such reorganization would deprive Southern Serbia of its special status and upset local leaders. In any case, the CB needs to take concrete steps forward on the ground and do a better job of publicizing what they have already done. Djurdjevic has done what he can -- opened a few more positions for Albanians in the local CB offices, for example -- but lacks the clout to affect real change either within the CB or from the local Albanians; it must come from his boss, Minister of Labor and Social Policy Rasim Ljajic, who has unfortunately shown dwindling interest in Southern Serbia. For example, Ljajic had been scheduled to participate in an October 29 Forum on Ethnic Relations conference in Southern Serbia but sent deputies at the last minute.

U.S. Assistance: Beyond Bricks and Mortar

¶10. The Albanian leaders' unwillingness to commit to Serbia shows a major goal of U.S. assistance to the region has not been achieved. The key to success for the region's economic integration with Serbia will be moving to practical approaches beyond infrastructure. Vranje Mayor Miroljub Stojcic, who has a record of such success in regional development, told the DCM on October 25 that Southern Serbia could grow to be an economic hub due to its strategic position and transnational business potential. Stojcic told the DCM that he saw a stable, prosperous Presevo Valley as an economic boon for Vranje. This is already happening; Albanian guest-workers have returned flush from Western Europe and opened small businesses, including restaurants and motels, to capitalize on lucrative opportunities. A major highway, "Corridor 10", runs from Belgrade

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to Skopje through Southern Serbia and the Presevo Valley lies between Bulgaria, Macedonia and Kosovo.

¶11. In order for Southern Serbia's integration to have permanence, assistance must move beyond bricks and mortar to cultural and civics training. OSCE local representative Martin Brooks told the DCM on October 26 that no donors were addressing party building, grant writing, and other "soft" development and the EU assistance program might withdraw from the region altogether. With this kind of assistance, Kamberi could move beyond short-sighted recriminations, Arsic could actually serve his Serb constituents and a group of concerned citizens could open their own teacher's college or maternity ward without waiting for the CB. This would counter the "cargo cult" mentality among the citizens of the Presevo Valley, many of whom do not equate foreign assistance with the region's integration with Serbia and think that donors will always be there, following a time of troubles.

Comment

¶12. Southern Serbia is fragile and warrants concern as Kosovo

status resolution approaches. The United States and GOS want the same thing -- a stable, prosperous Presevo Valley fully integrated into Serbia -- and post will use its influence to keep both Belgrade and local leaders engaged. In Belgrade, we will press Ljajic to deliver key CB projects and make security transparent. In Southern Serbia, we will press Albanian leaders to commit to a brighter future as a part of Serbia and not count on U.S. assistance if they choose otherwise. End Comment.

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